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Terminal Authority as a Function of Community

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AS A FUNCTION OF COMMUNITY

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In April 2006, President George W. Bush clarified his presidential authority by declaring himself as follows, "I'm the decider and I decide what is best." This declaration was largely an oversimplification of the decision-making authority of the President of the United States. The president certainly has and is expected to exercise decision-making authority, but his role as "Decider" has limiting boundaries imposed by the Constitution of the United States, which checks and balances presidential authority by means of the Legislative and Judiciary branches of government. He has terminal authority, the final word, within the limits set by the Constitution. These limits have been an ever-present point of challenge and debate in American politics.

Since this article is intended for pastors and those associated with pastoral ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it follows that we should ask where terminal authority lies in our church organization? Who are the deciders and what are the structures that balance and limit the exercise of power in the church? Does the church grant terminal authority as a function of leaders—pastors, conference officers, union and General Conference leaders? The history behind this question is long, complex, and, at times, painful. The early Advent believers initially rejected formal organization largely because of the treatment meted out by organizational leaders in the various churches toward these awakened believers who saw beyond the established belief structures. In 1860, James White articulated the attitude toward organization of those early days: "When we commenced to labor in this work, when the cause was young and the individuals who embraced it few, we did not see the necessity of any such steps [naming and organizing]. But it seems to me that the child is now so grown that it is exceedingly awkward to have no name for it" (J. White, 1860, p. 170).

This resistance to formally organizing their new movement began to subside as they faced the complexities of identity, growth, property ownership, and the maintenance of order, which resulted in the naming of the church and the adoption of a basic organizational structure in 1860 (Schwarz & General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Department of Education, 1979, p. 95). What was not settled was the issue of the personal authority of the leader. Who has permission to exercise power? This elemental question was left to be pondered in the crucible of actual leadership and administration. The pounding and grinding resulted in conflict and pain to a degree beyond what most of us are aware. In the midst of a particularly difficult administrative argument with GC President, George Butler, in Battle Creek in 1873, James White suffered a life-threatening stroke that required immediate bedrest and separation from his leadership duties (Burton, 2015, p. 52). Even in this serious state of illness, James White was badgered the next day for his opinion and guidance on pending decisions for both the church and the publishing work.

The practice of viewing James White as the final word on almost every aspect of decision-making reflects the historical tendency of humanity to formally and informally consolidate power in one or a few, as opposed to trusting in the collective opinion of the community. In the move to dominate and surpass his father's legitimate heirs, Abimelech, the son of Gideon by his Shechemite concubine, articulates this clearly in a question to his mother's family, "Which is better for you: to have all seventy of Jerub-Baal's (Gideon's) sons rule over you, or just one man" (Judg 9:2)? This tendency toward consolidation of power has been a challenge throughout the history of God's people. Divinely appointed organizational structure with rare exception begins as a distributed model, but through human effort it moves toward consolidation. The calling of the firstborn followed by that of the Levites, the confederacy of Israel under the Judges, and later

the priesthood of all believers are offset by the insistence of having a king and the establishment of the papacy. God empowered these communities by broadly distributing authority, only to have the community surrender that authority to a centralized leader.

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The secular historical parallel to the Seventh-day Adventist Church during the latter half of the 19th century was the remarkably centralized authority of secular institutions and organizations of the Industrial Revolution. Leadership of that period was symbolized by "barons" such as John D. Rockefeller (Standard Oil), Andrew Carnegie (U.S. Steel), and J.P. Morgan (Wall Street), among others (Goodwin, 2013). Secular leaders during this period exercised leadership more as kings than as mere men. The abuses and the extremity of greed for power leave us with tales of violence and cruelty almost beyond belief in civilized society. The Church during these years mirrored the leadership model of the industrial period "Great Man" model and moved toward what Ellen White consistently referred to as "Kingly Power" (E. G. White, 1985, p. 49) where decision-making was consolidated in one or a few leaders. This likewise resulted in autocratic abuses.

In an attempt to bring order and unity out of the ambiguity of leader authority plaguing the church in the early 1870s, George Butler authored a pamphlet entitled Leadership (1873), built upon the premise of "authority centralized in one person" (Burton, 2015, p. 69). He presented it at camp meetings and preaching appointments to rave reviews by hearers who were acculturated to the "Great Man" model of governance. The essence of this tract communicated that "one person was in charge and other leaders were subordinate to that person." All were to acquiesce to the decision of one man.

The aggregate positive reception encouraged Butler to present the paper to the General Conference Session of November 1873, where it was affirmed by majority vote as reflecting the view of the General Conference on leadership. This strong positive response to Butler's views was not shared by James and Ellen White. A telling excerpt of Ellen's response to him follows:

When this power which God has placed in the church is accredited to one man, and he is invested with the authority to be judgment for other minds, then the true Bible order is changed. Satan's efforts upon such a man's mind will be most subtle and sometimes overpowering, because through this mind he thinks he can affect many others. Your position on leadership is correct, if you give to the highest organized authority in the church what you have given to one man. God never designed that His work should bear the stamp of one man's mind and one man's judgment. (E. G. White, 1874, p. 496)

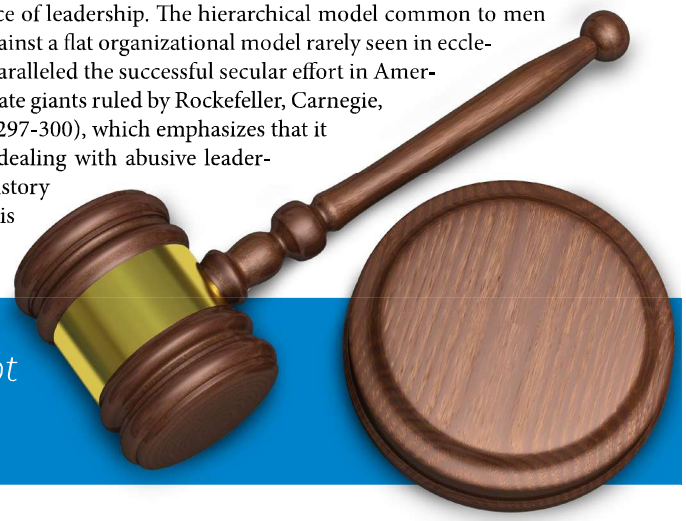
This leadership controversy debate ultimately resulted in a rescinding of the business action to adopt Butler's essay, Leadership, by the Seventh-day Adventist Church on the basis that it pointed the church in the direction of a papal model. It should be noted that Butler never appears to have advocated for himself as the person who exercises terminal authority, but rather his view was that James White held an apostolic role in the church that set him apart for this unilateral privilege of authority regardless of the office James might or might not hold.

This conflict set the stage for the next 30 years of leadership stress in the church. Those who championed what became known as "kingly power" advocated for terminal authority apart from deliberation by representatives of the body and held to the idea that leaders were to exercise judgment over members who were by assumption "subject" to their authority. The 1901 General Conference in Battle Creek saw Ellen White actively involved, following her 1900 return from Australia, in promoting a distributed leadership and governance model. She clearly rejected the kingly power model and the consolidation of authority in one or a few in favor of a broad distribution of authority among the members and clergy alike. She references these difficult years in the following words that establish the degree of seriousness attributed to violating these principles:

In the work of God no kingly authority is to be exercised by any human being, or by two or three. The representatives of the Conference, as it has been carried with authority for the last twenty years, shall be no longer justified in saying, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are we." The men in positions of trust have not been carrying the work wisely. (E. G. White, 1985, p. 29)

Though most Adventist history texts reference the 1901 General Conference Session as marking the reorganization of the church, it should be considered that the act to reorganize the church was not the primary focus or common purpose but, rather, 1901 in Battle Creek was a battle between two ideologies of the practice of leadership. The hierarchical model common to men down through the ages faced off against a flat organizational model rarely seen in ecclesiastical structure. Historically, it paralleled the successful secular effort in America to dismantle the abusive corporate giants ruled by Rockefeller, Carnegie, Morgan, etc. (Goodwin, 2013, pp. 297-300), which emphasizes that it was not just the church that was dealing with abusive leadership practices, but at this time in history society at large was reacting to this dysfunctional model.

. . . our position does not establish our value. . .



What emerged in the 1901 General Conference Session that was affirmed again in 1903 and 1908 was an organizational structure that was designed to ward off the human tendency to consolidate authority and attendant power in a few rather than distributing it broadly among the whole. Though it is possible and even appropriate to graph the structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in pyramidal form, it should be understood that the structure created in 1901 was a hierarchy of order as opposed to a hierarchy of power. Leaders at each successive level cooperated with the leaders at the next lower level, but they did not and do not have a superior/

subordinate relationship because their accountability was to their respective constituencies. Leaders were chosen by the people through their delegates and these leaders were empowered to lead on a limited basis of both time and scope. Consequently, leaders in the Church operate on loaned authority rather than owned authority. Formal authority was deposited with the membership and leaders were to serve as stewards of that authority.

A further inoculation against the creeping influence of kingly power is revealed in the absence of terminal authority for its elected and appointed leaders. Seventh-day Adventist leaders are empowered to analyze and recommend, while terminal authority is committed to the various executive committees—church board and business sessions at the local level, and executive committees and conference sessions at the conference, union, and General Conference levels. This part of the SDA structural system disallows unilateral decision-making for strategic decisions by elected or appointed leaders, which flies in the face of what secular corporate or political leadership assumes in society. Leadership literature assumes that leaders make decisions. In an effort to hedge against the re-emergence of kingly power, our brethren, under the influence of the Holy Spirit and the inspired counsel of God's servant, envisioned a system where all major decisions regarding mission, finance, and personnel were designed to be made by the body—not by individuals.

Matthew 18 sets the standard for terminal authority, though it is best known for counsel on conflict and discipline, but the underlying issue of the chapter is authority. The point of terminal authority relating to conflict and church discipline is the church—not the accuser, not the pastor or elder, not the church board, but the church, collectively, arbitrates the final decision (vs. 17). And that decision of the body is honored by our God in heaven as "binding" (vs. 18). In Matthew 20, Jesus announces that His followers would not assume superiority over one another. That condition is not negated because of conferred position. Leaders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church serve their constituencies—they do not rule their constituencies. 1 Peter 5:2 places leaders among rather than over. In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, our position does not establish our value, but rather it defines our responsibility. Our value is the same for all—"Let us labor with a perseverance and energy proportionate to the value Christ places upon His blood-bought heritage. Human souls have cost too much to be trifled with, or treated with harshness or indifference" (E. G. White, 1985, p. 7).

The creeping influence of the leadership assumptions and practices of the world we inhabit remain a grave danger to the church. Kingly power tagged along with the appointment of a king in Israel. It raised its head to cause grief and misery for Jesus and finally cost Him His life. Kingly power was gradually conferred upon the Bishop of Rome and in the process nearly destroyed the church that Jesus died to plant. This same infection produced pain and grief for our pioneers in the late 19th century that has yet to be fully described, though recently more has been written to mark those tragic periods. The 21st century church is not immune. The corrupting influence of power can lead us to forget why the church was structured as it was. May the Holy Spirit reminds us of who was entrusted with authority—the Church, the Body and Bride of Christ. Leaders serve the process with creativity, careful analysis, and God-inspired recommendations, but the "Decider" is the Church.

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DISCUSS THIS ON

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